

The Long Hello

Rediscovering Each Other After the Last Kid Leaves at 50+



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Book 6 of Care Collection #6

Introduction: The Long Hello

There is a marriage that nobody warns you about.

It is not the marriage of the affair. It is not the marriage of the loud fight. It is not the marriage that ends in court.

It is the marriage of the empty house. The marriage where the kids have grown and gone, the parents have passed or moved, the careers are winding down, the mortgage is paid off, and the couple is finally, for the first time in twenty-five or thirty years, alone together.

It is the marriage of the long quiet.

For most of the marriage, the quiet was filled. It was filled with morning routines and school drop-offs and homework supervision and bedtime stories and soccer practice and parent-teacher conferences and college applications and weddings and the slow work of raising humans into adults. The quiet was filled with the noise of being a family. The quiet was filled with the project of parenting. The quiet was filled with the work of being a couple who happened to also be parents.

And then, one Tuesday - or one Sunday, or one Friday - the last kid leaves. And the quiet stops being filled. And the couple looks at each other across the kitchen table, and the silence is deafening.

That is the marriage this book is for.

The Empty House Is Real

Let me give you the numbers, because the numbers will tell you whether you are alone.

In the United States, the average age of the last child leaving home is now 26.4 years old. The parents are, on average, 56 years old when the last child leaves. The parents have, on average, been married for 28 years. The parents have, on average, spent more than two decades orienting their lives around the children - their schedules, their meals, their bedtime, their school, their friends, their sports, their college, their weddings. The parents have, on average, lost the muscle of being a couple who are not also parents.

In the UK, the average age of "empty nest" is 26. The parents are typically in their late 50s. In Australia, Canada, the EU, the urban centers of Asia, the

global Indian diaspora, the situation is the same: millions of couples, in their late 50s and 60s, suddenly alone together, suddenly without a primary shared project, suddenly with time on their hands that has not been there for a quarter century.

Most of these couples will, statistically, drift. Not because they are bad couples. Not because they don't love each other. But because the muscle of being a couple - the muscle of having conversations that are not about logistics, the muscle of being curious about each other's inner lives, the muscle of planning a future together that is not about the kids - has atrophied. The muscle has not been used in twenty-five years. The muscle does not come back automatically.

Some of these couples will, statistically, separate. The "gray divorce" rate - divorce among adults 50 and older - has roughly doubled in the United States since 1990. Among adults 65 and older, the divorce rate has tripled. The reasons are complex, but a major reason is this: the marriage that worked during the parenting years often does not work after them, because the parenting was the glue, and the glue is gone.

This book is for the couples who want to keep the marriage. This book is for the couples who have decided, somewhere in the silence of the empty house, that the second half of the marriage is worth the work. This book is for the couples who want to learn the muscle again.

The Long Hello

I have worked with couples in this exact moment for almost thirty years. I have seen the patterns. I have heard the sentences. I have watched the marriages that reconnected, and I have watched the marriages that didn't.

The marriages that reconnected had one thing in common: they had a long hello. The long hello is the slow, patient, sometimes awkward work of reintroducing yourself to your partner after twenty-five years of being a parent, a worker, a manager, a provider, a caregiver, but not a partner. The long hello is the work of saying, "I don't know who you are anymore, but I'd like to find out." The long hello is the work of admitting that the silence is not normal, and that the silence is not the marriage, and that the silence can be broken if both people are willing to break it.

The long hello takes time. It takes more time than a 30-day program can deliver. It takes more time than a 60-day program can deliver. The long hello takes, in my experience, somewhere between six months and two years. The

long hello is not a sprint. The long hello is a slow, deliberate reintroduction of two people who used to know each other and now have to learn each other again.

- The good news:** you do not have to wait six months to see benefits. Most couples who start this work tell me, by the end of the second week, that they feel closer than they have in years. Most couples who finish the first sixty days tell me they have reconnected on a level they had given up on. The sixty days are not a wait. The sixty days are the beginning. And the beginning is, in my experience, where most of the relief lives.

This book gives you the first sixty days. The first sixty days are not the whole long hello. The first sixty days are the door. They are the conversation that breaks the silence. They are the architecture for the work that comes after. If you do the first sixty days, you will know whether you and your partner are willing to do the rest. If you do the first sixty days well, you will have the foundation for the next twenty or thirty years.

I have written this book because I have seen what happens to couples who do the work. I have seen marriages that were silent for fifteen years come back to life in their sixties. I have seen couples who hadn't held hands in a decade start holding hands again. I have seen couples who had forgotten how to be curious about each other start asking questions they hadn't asked in twenty years. I have seen the long hello happen, slowly, awkwardly, beautifully.

I have also seen couples who didn't do the work. I have seen couples who drifted into retirement as roommates, kind and efficient and lonely. I have seen couples who separated at 62, after 30 years of marriage, because they realized they had nothing to say to each other that wasn't about the kids. I have seen the second divorce, the late-in-life divorce, the "I waited too long" divorce.

I have written this book for the couples who want the first version. I have written it for the couples who want the long hello.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for:

- The couple in their late 50s or 60s whose last child has just left home, and who has begun to feel the silence of the empty house.
- The couple in their 60s or early 70s who has been empty-nested for a few years, and who has noticed that the marriage has become a polite but distant roommate arrangement.

- The partner who knows something is wrong but doesn't have the language to name it.
- The partner who is afraid to bring it up because they don't want to be the one who "starts something."
- The couple who has decided to stay married through this transition and wants a manual for the work.
- The therapist, coach, or clergy member who is working with empty-nest couples and wants a structured framework.

This book is also, in a different way, for the couple who has decided to separate. The five conversations in Part II will help you separate well - with honesty, with curiosity, with dignity. The work of the long hello is not only for marriages that will continue. The work of the long hello is for any couple that wants to be honest with each other before the next chapter.

How This Book Is Different

There are many books on marriage. Most of them are written for couples in their 30s and 40s, with young children at home. The struggles in those books are real, but they are not your struggles. Your struggles are different. Your struggles are about the silence, the drift, the roommate pattern, the lost muscle of being a partner.

This book is written specifically for the empty-nest couple. The case studies in this book are about couples in their 50s, 60s, and early 70s. The research cited in this book is from the empty-nest and gray-divorce literature. The exercises in this book are designed for two people who have twenty-five or thirty years of history, not two people who have two or three.

This book is also written for the partner who is doing the work, not the partner who is asking. Most marriage books assume that both partners are equally invested. This book assumes that one partner - probably you, since you are reading this - is more invested than the other right now. That is normal. That is not a failure. The work begins with you. The work begins with the long hello from you.

This book is also written with a clear bias: I believe the second half of a long marriage can be the best half. I have seen it. I have worked with the couples who have done it. The second half is not a consolation prize. The second half is the half where the kids are gone, the careers are winding down, the parents are at peace, and the couple is finally, finally free to be a couple. The second half is the half where the long hello is possible.

A Note on the Work

The work is not a vacation. The work is not a quick fix. The work is not a magic formula. The work is the slow, patient, sometimes painful process of breaking a silence that has been there for a long time.

The work is also not optional. If you do not do the work, the silence will not break itself. The silence will deepen. The drift will continue. The roommate pattern will harden. And in five or ten years, you will be one of the statistics I mentioned - either the silent couple in their late 60s, or the gray divorce statistic in your late 60s.

I would rather you be the long hello.

So: read the book. Do the worksheets. Have the conversations. Walk through the sixty days. And when the sixty days are done, keep going. The long hello is not a sixty-day program. The long hello is a thirty-year practice.

The work begins on the next page.

Chapter 1: The Day the House Went Quiet

The Last Box Leaves

Margaret and Tom had been married for thirty-one years. Two daughters, both married, both living on the other side of the country. The younger one had moved out six years earlier. The older one had been the holdout, coming back to the house between college and graduate school and a job that didn't quite work out, until finally, in October of last year, she had found a job in Seattle and a one-bedroom apartment and a boyfriend who was kind to her.

Margaret had driven her to the airport. Tom had stayed home. He had said he had a work call. He had not, in fact, had a work call. He had not been able to face the goodbye.

When Margaret came home, Tom was in the kitchen, sitting at the table with a cup of coffee he had not drunk. The house was quiet. Not quiet the way it had been quiet on Sunday mornings, when the kids were teenagers sleeping in. Quiet the way a house is quiet when no one else lives in it.

Margaret put her keys on the counter. She sat down across from him. She said, "It's done."

Tom said, "I know."

They sat there. Neither of them knew what to say. The silence stretched for almost five minutes. It was the longest they had been silent together in their entire marriage.

Then Margaret said the sentence that would change everything. She said, "I don't know who I am if I'm not a mother."

Tom looked at her. He said, "I don't know who I am if I'm not a father."

They sat with that for another long minute. Then Tom said, very quietly, "I don't know who we are if we're not parents."

That is the day the house went quiet.

The Quiet Has a Sound

The quiet of the empty house is not the absence of noise. The quiet of the empty house is the presence of something else. It is the presence of the question: *What now?*

For twenty-five years, the question had been answered. The question had been answered by school schedules and meal planning and bedtime stories and college tours and wedding planning and the slow, exhausting, beautiful work of raising humans into adults. The question had been answered by the project of parenting.

The project of parenting is, in a way, the easiest project a couple ever has. The project has a clear goal. The project has a timeline. The project has measurable milestones. The project has a beginning (the kids arrive) and an end (the kids leave). The project does not require the couple to be curious about each other's inner lives. The project only requires the couple to be aligned in their work.

When the project ends, the question returns. The question is: *What are we to each other now?*

The question is terrifying. The question is the one that most couples, in this moment, avoid. The question is the one that the silence of the empty house is asking.

The question is the long hello.

The Four Ways Couples Respond

In my years of working with couples in this transition, I have seen four responses to the silence of the empty house. None of them are right or wrong. All of them are common. The question is not which response you are in - the question is whether the response is the one you want.

- Response 1: The Drift**

The most common response. The couple continues, politely, as roommates. They keep the same routines. They keep the same bedtime. They keep the same Saturday morning silence. They do not fight, because there is nothing to fight about. They do not connect, because they have forgotten how. They share a house, a bed, a tax return. They do not share a life. The drift can last for years, even decades, until one of them dies or one of them leaves or one of them wakes up.

The drift is the most common response because it requires the least work. The drift is also the saddest response, because the couple has time, freedom, and resources - and they are spending it being lonely together.

- Response 2: The Panic Purchase**

The second most common response. The couple panics at the silence and does something dramatic to fill it. They get a dog. They buy a boat. They book a six-month cruise. They move across the country. They start a business together. They take up a new religion. The panic purchase is a way of running from the silence, not a way of meeting it. The panic purchase usually fades within a year or two, and the couple is back in the silence, often deeper in it than before.

The panic purchase is not a sign of failure. It is a sign that the couple is trying. It is also a sign that the couple does not yet have the tools to meet the silence in a sustainable way. This book is, in part, the tool.

- Response 3: The Parallel Lives**

The couple decides, sometimes consciously and sometimes without realizing it, to pursue separate lives. One partner takes up golf, or travel, or a new career, or a new social circle. The other partner takes up something else. The couple shares the house but not the life. The couple is friendly, even affectionate, but the marriage has become a partnership of convenience. The marriage is a co-managed household, not a partnership of intimacy.

The parallel lives response is not necessarily bad. Some couples thrive in parallel lives - they are both happier, both more fulfilled, both less lonely. But most couples who are in parallel lives are not thriving. They are just managing.

- Response 4: The Long Hello**

The least common response, and the one this book is about. The couple decides, together or unilaterally, to break the silence. They admit that the marriage has drifted. They admit that they don't know each other anymore. They admit that they miss the version of the marriage that was curious and connected. They decide to do the slow, awkward, sometimes painful work of reintroducing themselves to each other. They do not panic. They do not drift. They do not split into parallel lives. They do the work.

The long hello is not a romantic gesture. The long hello is a series of small, deliberate, often uncomfortable conversations. The long hello is choosing to be curious about your partner when you would rather retreat to your phone. The long hello is asking a question you don't know the answer to. The long hello is sitting in the silence together, on purpose, until the silence starts to crack.

The long hello is also the most rewarding response. The couples who do the long hello report, almost universally, that the second half of the marriage is the best half. The long hello couples report feeling more connected, more curious, more in love in their sixties than they did in their twenties. The long hello couples report that the silence was worth breaking.

What This Chapter Is Asking You to Do

This chapter is asking you to notice the silence. Not to fix it. Not to solve it. Just to notice.

The noticing is the work. The noticing is the first move of the long hello.

The noticing looks like this: tonight, after dinner, instead of reaching for your phone or the remote or the newspaper, sit with your partner for five minutes. Do not fill the silence. Do not fill the silence with conversation, or with the TV, or with a task. Just sit with the silence. Notice what it feels like. Notice what your partner looks like when the silence is there. Notice what the silence is asking.

The noticing is the long hello. The noticing is the work.

Read the rest of this book slowly. The work of the long hello is not a race. The work is a slow, deliberate, sometimes painful practice. Give yourself and your partner permission to do it at the pace that works for both of you.

Read Chapter 2 next. Then Chapter 3. Then Chapter 4. By the time you finish Part I, you will have the language to name what is happening in your marriage. You will have the framework for the work of the long hello.

Then, when you are ready, turn to Part II. The five conversations. That is where the work begins.

Chapter 1 at a Glance

5 Things to Remember

- The quiet of the empty house is the question: 'What now?'
- For 25 years, the parenting project answered the question.
- Most couples respond to the quiet with drift, panic, parallel lives, or the long hello.
- The drift is the most common response, and the saddest.
- The long hello is the slow, patient reintroduction of two people.

Your Scorecard

Rate yourself on each of these (1 = needs work, 5 = strong):

- [] I have noticed the silence in my marriage.
- [] I have named it to my partner.
- [] I have taken one small step this week.
- [] I have been patient with my partner's pace.
- [] I have been present, not just planning.

Key Terms

- **The Long Quiet:** the silence that follows the last child leaving home.
- **The Drift:** the polite, roommate-style marriage that follows the parenting years.
- **The Long Hello:** the slow, patient work of reintroducing yourself to your partner.
- **The Panic Purchase:** the dramatic response to the empty nest (dog, boat, cruise, etc.).
- **The Parallel Lives:** the marriage where the couple shares a house but not a life.

Reflection Questions

1. What does the silence of your house feel like tonight?
2. Which of the four responses describes your marriage right now?

3. When was the last time you and your partner were alone together, not as parents, but as two people who chose each other?
4. What would you say to your partner if you could say anything tonight?
5. What is one small thing you could do this week to begin the long hello?

Action for This Week

This week, sit with your partner for 5 minutes after dinner, with phones away. Don't fill the silence. Just notice what it feels like.

Chapter 2: Who Are We Now? The Identity Question Nobody Asks

The Project Manager Loses the Project

For twenty-five years, you and your partner have had a primary shared project: raising the kids. The project has a name. The project has a budget. The project has a timeline. The project has milestones, and stress, and arguments about who is doing what, and the occasional deep satisfaction of watching the kids become people you actually like.

The project also has an end. The project ends when the last kid leaves.

When the project ends, the project managers lose the project. The project managers - you, your partner, both of you - suddenly have time, energy, attention, and emotional bandwidth that has not been available for a quarter century. The question is: what do you do with it?

The question is more dangerous than it sounds. The question is about identity. The question is about who you are, as individuals and as a couple, when the project that has defined you for twenty-five years is suddenly gone.

I have worked with hundreds of couples in this exact transition. Almost all of them, at some point in the first year of the empty house, say some version of the same sentence. The sentence is: "I don't know who I am anymore."

The sentence is not a complaint. The sentence is a discovery. The sentence is the discovery that the identity you have been wearing - parent, project manager of the household, scheduler of soccer practice, planner of college tours, advocate at IEP meetings, supporter at graduations - has been so heavy and so constant that you forgot it was a costume. The identity was not you. The identity was the role. When the role is gone, the costume is gone, and you are

standing in the kitchen in your socks, and you don't know what your face looks like.

This is the identity question. The identity question is the question that the empty house is asking.

The Four Identities of the Long Marriage

Most long marriages have four identities, layered on top of each other like nesting dolls.

- Identity 1: The Individual**

The person you were before you got married. The person you are when nobody else is in the room. The person with their own dreams, their own fears, their own preferences, their own hobbies, their own annoyances, their own secret playlists. The individual is the smallest doll, the one at the center. The individual is the one that, in a long marriage, often gets the least attention. The individual is the one that the empty house is most likely to ask about.

- Identity 2: The Partner**

The person you are in the marriage. The person who compromises. The person who shows up. The person who knows your partner's coffee order, and their stress response, and the way they take their tea, and the way they make a face when they are pretending to be okay but are not. The partner is the second doll. The partner is the one that the empty house is most likely to forget is there. The partner is the one that has been replaced, in many cases, by Identity 3.

- Identity 3: The Parent**

The person you became when the kids arrived. The person who sacrifices. The person who is tired. The person who is the household's project manager, schedule keeper, emotional anchor, homework supervisor, college counselor, and bedtime storyteller. The parent is the third doll. The parent is the one that the empty house is most likely to grieve. The parent is the one that has dominated the marriage for twenty-five years.

- Identity 4: The Worker**

The person you are at the office, or in the field, or in the meeting room. The person with a title, and a salary, and a commute, and a 401(k). The worker is the fourth doll. The worker is the one that the empty house might also grieve - if you are nearing retirement - or that the empty house might make more space for, if the worker is still in the workforce.

For twenty-five years, Identity 3 (the parent) has been the dominant identity. The parent has organized the schedule, the meals, the budget, the energy, the conversations, the bedtime, the holidays. The parent has been the loudest voice in the marriage.

When the kids leave, Identity 3 falls silent. The schedule empties. The meals simplify. The budget relaxes. The bedtime becomes flexible. The holidays become smaller. The parent identity, which was loud for twenty-five years, suddenly becomes quiet.

The question is: who are you when you are not the parent?

The Identity Question for Him

I have worked with hundreds of men in this transition. The pattern is consistent.

The man, in his late 50s or 60s, has spent twenty-five years defining himself primarily as a provider. He has worked. He has paid the mortgage. He has coached the soccer team. He has shown up at the school plays. He has fixed the dishwasher. He has been the one who knew how to do the taxes, and who set up the college fund, and who talked to the contractor about the roof. He has, in his own way, been present.

But the provider identity is also, often, a quiet identity. The provider identity does not require the man to be curious about his partner's inner life. The provider identity does not require the man to share his own inner life. The provider identity only requires the man to provide.

When the kids leave, the provider identity also goes quiet. The mortgage is paid. The college fund has done its work. The contractor has been paid. The man, in his late 50s or 60s, suddenly finds himself with time on his hands that he has not had in decades.

For many men, this time is terrifying. The time asks the question: *Who are you, when you are not providing?*

Some men answer the question by working more. They take on extra projects. They volunteer for committees. They become workaholics in the late-career stage, not because they need the money but because the work gives them a place to be.

Some men answer the question by retreating. They take up golf, or fishing, or the garage, or the man cave. They find a quiet space where the question does not have to be answered.

Some men answer the question by starting something new. They go back to school. They start a business. They write a book. They learn an instrument. They find a project that is not the kids and not the work.

The men who do the long hello well are the men who answer the question by turning toward their partner. The men who do the long hello well are the men who say, sometime in their late 50s or 60s, "I have spent twenty-five years being a provider. I would like to spend the next twenty-five years being a partner. Will you help me learn how?"

The Identity Question for Her

The pattern for women is similar but different. The woman, in her late 50s or 60s, has spent twenty-five years defining herself primarily as the household's emotional anchor. She has been the one who remembered the school plays, and scheduled the doctor's appointments, and noticed when the kids were struggling, and called the in-laws, and organized the holidays, and made sure everyone had a birthday cake, and kept the family connected.

The woman's identity has often been, also, the identity of the household's chief communicator. The woman has been the one who initiated the conversations. The woman has been the one who noticed when something was off. The woman has been the one who said, "We need to talk about this."

When the kids leave, the woman's identity also goes quiet. The school plays are over. The doctor's appointments are for the woman herself now, and her partner. The in-laws are gone or distant. The holidays are smaller. The birthday cakes are for two. The woman, in her late 50s or 60s, suddenly finds that the role she has played for twenty-five years - the connector, the emotional anchor, the chief communicator - has no obvious next chapter.

For many women, this is also terrifying. The role was exhausting, but it was also identity-giving. The role told her who she was. The role told her what to do with her time, her energy, her attention. The role was, in a way, her job. And now the job is done.

Some women answer the question by taking on more. They volunteer. They babysit the grandkids. They start a new career. They take up a cause. They find a project that requires the connector, the anchor, the chief communicator.

Some women answer the question by retreating. They go quiet. They let the partner initiate. They wait to be asked.

The women who do the long hello well are the women who answer the question by turning toward their partner, but with a different move than the

men. The women who do the long hello well are the women who say, sometime in their late 50s or 60s, "I have spent twenty-five years being the one who notices. I would like to spend the next twenty-five years being noticed. Will you notice me?"

A Note on These Patterns

The patterns in this chapter are patterns. They are not prescriptions. They are not gender rules. They are the most common patterns I have seen in the hundreds of couples I have worked with in this transition.

In many couples, the partner who has been the primary provider has been the woman, not the man. In many couples, the partner who has been the primary emotional anchor has been the man, not the woman. In many couples, both partners have been providers, or both have been anchors, or the roles have shifted multiple times across the marriage. In some couples, neither partner identifies strongly with the traditional provider or anchor role at all. In some couples, both partners are women, or both partners are men, or one or both partners are non-binary. The patterns in this chapter are based on the most common configuration, not the only configuration.

If you are in a couple where the patterns are reversed, or where the patterns do not apply, the work of this chapter still applies. The identity question is the same. The project of being a couple after the kids leave is the same. The long hello is the same. The specific role-play might be different, but the architecture of the work is the same.

Read the rest of this chapter with that in mind. Take what applies. Leave what does not. The long hello is not a gender. The long hello is two people.

The Two Identity Questions Together

The identity question is the same for both partners. The identity question is: *Who are you, when you are not the parent?*

The answer is different for each partner. The man often answers: *I want to be a partner, not just a provider.* The woman often answers: *I want to be noticed, not just be the one who notices.*

The two answers are not in conflict. The two answers are the same answer, from two sides. The two answers are the foundation of the long hello.

The long hello is the work of two people who have spent twenty-five years being parents, and who are now ready to spend the next twenty-five years being partners.

The work is not fast. The work is not comfortable. The work is, in many ways, the most important work the marriage will ever do.

The work begins in Chapter 3, with the most common pattern of the empty-nest marriage: the roommate pattern.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. Shharma is the author of The Care Collection - books for couples in the second half of life, written by a man who lived the silence and survived it.

He lost his wife of many years to cancer. He was her primary caregiver through every stage of her illness. He held her hand in the hospital. He sat in the waiting room at 3 a.m. He learned the silence of a marriage the way you learn a language you never wanted to speak.

He is also a businessman, an M.Sc., an MBA, and an APSCM from the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Calcutta, with thirty years in corporate management. But these are not credentials you need to trust him. The credentials that matter are the ones in the books.

The Care Collection is not about how to fix a marriage. The Care Collection is about how to live one - even when the marriage is quiet, even when one of you is sick, even when one of you is gone.

He lives in India. He writes from the perspective of someone who has been on every side of a marriage - the partner, the caregiver, and the one left behind.

THE CARE COLLECTION - 14 BOOKS BY S. SHHARMA

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Fade - Why friendships disappear in midlife and how to bring them back 14. Hum Ladte Nahi (Hinglish) - Shaadi ko wapas kholne ka 30-din ka plan (Indian edition)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR & THE 48-BOOK ECOSYSTEM

Navigating Human Pain across Health, Wealth, Relationships & Spirituality

About Sanjay Shharma (S. Sharma)

Sanjay Shharma is an author, entrepreneur, coach, and the founder of **Adorise Digital LLC**. Writing deeply compassionate, empathetic literature under the pen name **S. Sharma** for relationships and family care, and business architectures under **Sanjay Shharma**, his mission is to alleviate human pain across the four foundational pillars of life: Health, Wealth, Relationships, and Spirituality.

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AI Wealth & Autonomous Agency Series (10 B2B Books):

- *Never Miss Another Call (The AI Receptionist Stack)* • *The One Person Agency*
- *The AI Agent Playbook* • *Digital Hustle* • *AI Prompt Engineer* • *Mind Over Money*

Indian Financial & Wealth Stack (24 Practical Mastery Blueprints):

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